

Sound sensitivity



Fear overview



Fear is a normal response to anything that an animal might perceive as a threat. It is a useful survival mechanism. It protects the animal from unknown things or situations that could be harmful. Caution of the unknown that proves to be unfounded is far less costly than throwing caution to the wind and being proved wrong. Imagine being an Antelope faced with a Lion and deciding that all is well. You are not likely to get a second chance at that particular lottery!!

Dogs can develop fear to a wide range of things including people, other animals, to inanimate objects and to noises such as household noises or fireworks. Situations too can be alarming, such as travelling in cars or on trains or being left alone.

Fear becomes a problem when it fails to serve the animal for the purpose it was intended- self preservation- and when it effects their quality of life and, in turn, the quality of life you have with them.

Two things to bear in mind as we look at the process needed to address fear in dogs. The first is that fear can be both preinstalled (genetically passed on) and learned through experiences and the consequences of them.

The second thing is that while fear is easily acquired, it takes time and patience to resolve.



Fear overview

Remember that you are going to inevitably experience set backs when you can't control at what level the scary thing is delivered. E.g. out in the world where cars may backfire or you come across sudden, loud noises unexpectedly. In these situations do everything you can to get your dog away and comfort them.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning

Desensitization is a technique that was originally developed to treat people with anxiety and phobias. The subject is exposed to an object or situation that they find frightening but at an intensity that does not produce a fearful response. If you were terrified of ants, for example, your first exposure might involve showing you a cartoon of a pink, unrealistic ant. You wouldn't be the slightest bit afraid (hopefully). The intensity - in this case, degree of realism - is then gradually increased provided you continue to feel ok. Over time you become less and less "sensitive" until the problem thing or situation becomes neutral.

Desensitization is generally a slow process (not unlike watching paint dry!) and so can be challenging for dog owners who are desperate to see their friend feel better. Fortunately, there is a second technique that we can use in conjunction with desensitization that can not only accelerate the process, but actually changes the dog's attitude towards the scary thing. Instead of being afraid, they become pleased to encounter the scary thing because they associate it with a pleasurable outcome. This technique is called counter conditioning and involves the reliable pairing of the scary thing or event (at a level which does not cause fear) with something highly pleasurable.

With this technique, the dog has no influence over outcomes as he/she might during obedience training. He/She is simply learning that one thing reliably predicts another and for it to be at it's most effective the pairing must occur every time the scary thing does. In other words, the positive experience occurs regardless of the dog's response to the trigger.

If, at any point, the dog shows the original reaction to the trigger, it means the intensity is too high. It is important to then back off to a reduced trigger intensity and work back up gradually again. No good comes of teaching the dog the world isn't mostly safe. In fact, it can make the dog worse.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning

Order of Events

The most important thing in ensuring that this gentle technique is successful, is that the order of events is correct. The trigger predicts the yummy stuff and not the other way around. This will become apparent when we talk about the technique in relation to sound sensitivity.



Fixing noise sensitivity

Management:

The first thing to do is to avoid exposure to those noises that scare your dog. Of course this is easier said than done and is not a “cure” as such. It simply ensures that your dog does not become frightened. For some fears in dogs it might well be practical to take a straight forward management route but it is rare not to include some form of behavior modification.

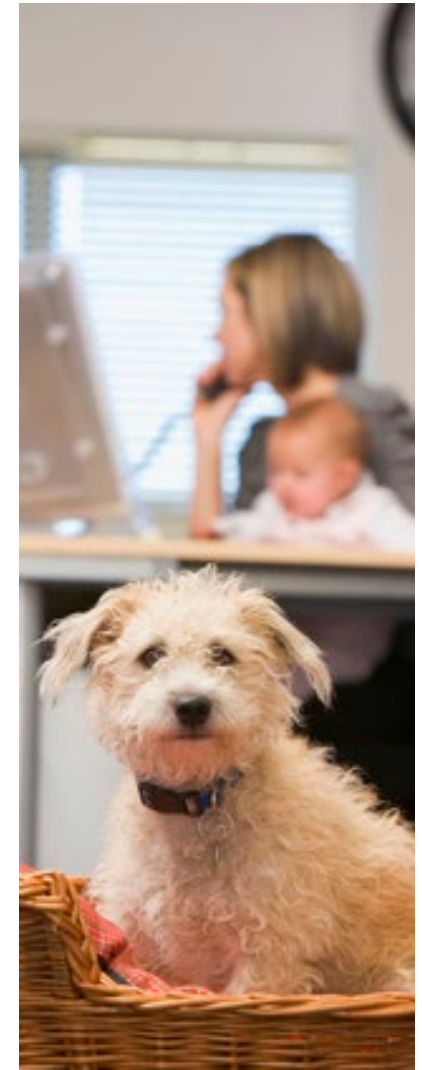
With sound sensitivity, management alone is almost impossible. We are never likely to predict when sudden noises may occur or when we might be caught in a thunderstorm and we certainly can't hot foot it out of the country during the rainy season. None the less, there is a place for management in the plan. If at all possible reduce the risk of exposure by checking for local events that might involve fireworks or any noise that your dog might be sensitive to and keep an eye on the weather forecast in case of thunderstorms. If you are able to plan ahead in this way, prepare a safe place for your dog (they will likely have a preferred room or location). Close the windows and curtains to minimize the noise and make the room as comfortable as possible.

N.b. The idea that comforting a dog in distress will reinforce the fear is a myth. There is zero evidence in behavior science to support such an assertion. Fear is not a choice. It is an involuntary response to a situation. The behavior a dog exhibits as a result is motivated by the fear and NOT the desire for food or attention. Reassuring your dog during fearful experiences will at least give them another focus and may, indeed, aid recovery. Don't force physical attention on them, but, if they want it you will not be doing anything to harm his prospects of recovery by giving it to them. Imagine if you were afraid of heights and you were stood at the top of a cliff. Would you rather your partner abandoned you there with no clue as to the way down or would you rather they held your hand, reassured you with a gentle word, and calmly guided you off the cliff?

your dog's training plan

What you will need:

1. A safe place for situations outside your control. Your dog will doubtless give you some clues to this.
2. A supply of **very** tasty treats. This should be something that your dog likes a great deal and they only get when encountering the noises and situations they find alarming. Some suggestions might be cooked chicken, freeze dried sprats or liver treats. You may need to “audition” foods to see what floats their boat!
3. A means of playing back recordings of sudden noises such as firework displays, traffic and gunshots. This should have the means to control the volume and should be capable of reaching a level similar to the real thing.



Your dog's training plan

1. Make or download some sounds of thunderstorms, fireworks and any other, sudden, explosive sounds (links to some are included at the end of this document). For the early sessions you will want to make these recordings short but various. Initially keeping each "event" short will be important as we want to keep your dog's stress levels below anything that causes fear. Generally events that are longer in duration will be harder for them to deal with so we want them absolutely comfortable with the sound itself before we extend their duration. So, our first concern will be making your dog happy with gradually increasing volume. When we have achieved that we will look at prolonging the duration of the sound.
2. Have your dog's favourite treat on hand. If you are going to use a bag or treat pouch be sure to wear it as much as possible so that you don't tip your dog off that a training session is about to begin. It is essential that the only thing that predicts the tasty stuff is the recorded sound! This may mean placing caches of treats around the house where you can quickly get to it.
3. If you are on your own when training, create recordings that have periods of silence in them of varying length. This way you can not only predict when the next one is going to play but you will also avoid tipping your dog off by stopping and starting the machine. Equally a readily portable player such as an mp3 player can be surreptitiously played. If this is your plan, carry the player around when not training and handle it frequently (without playing it)
4. Periodically during the day, play a sound at very low level. This needs to be at a level which your dog shows no concern about so err on the side of caution. Shortly after the sound plays deliver the treat and continue to feed until the sound stops. Here's the order of events:

Sound begins -> Feeding commences -> Sound stops -> feeding stops

your dog's training plan

What we are looking for:

Continue to do the same exercise with the sounds at the same volume until you see an indication that your dog is anticipating delivery of their delicious treat. This may be as palpable as a waggy tail or it may be as subtle as looking towards you or the treat bag. This shows that your dog has made the connection between the sound and the treat. Once you see this happening reliably, increase the volume slightly and repeat the process. You can do these exercises as often as you like during the day but keep intervals irregular. Don't worry if you do only a few in a day (or if you do none) It's all "money in the bank"!

If all goes to plan you will eventually have the recordings playing at very high levels equivalent to that of a real storm/fireworks. When you are doing this regularly with your dog and they look entirely happy, advance to recordings that are longer in duration by a second or two and repeat the process. When your dog shows the same anticipation referred to earlier increase the duration a little more and repeat the process again. Continue to increase the duration gradually.

If your dog shows signs of anxiety at any time stop and feed generously. When you resume, take a step back by either reducing the duration or the volume level of the sound.

Medication

Medication can play an important role in managing and treating fears and phobias in dogs. In conjunction with behaviour modification and environmental control, medication can help to alleviate anxiety, improve quality of life and make training outcomes better.

Training can be set back significantly if a dog experiences a panic attack while the process is under way. So, if training is being undertaken at a time of year when problem events are likely (such as storms or firework displays) it is certainly worth considering drug interventions. Some are intended to be short term in nature. I.e. for specific events that can be predicted and will allow your dog to make it through with the least possible anxiety.

Others can be prescribed for longer term use, such as during a storm season, so that training is less likely to be interrupted.

Of course, if it is possible to train with very little risk of a fear inducing event taking place, then medication may not be necessary assuming that the training is successful and completed before the risk increases.

The above is for guidance only. It is intended only to make you aware that medication is an option and is available. We strongly recommend that you make an appointment with your vet to discuss the options and to decide, based on their advice, if medication would be appropriate.



Links to sound effects

2. Here's some gravel sounds.

https://www.dropbox.com/s/sdumrmiquyhq8x0/gravel_mixdown.mp3?dl=0

1. This is general traffic noise. It ebbs and flows but doesn't have any sudden noises.

I would suggest that start by putting it on loop and have it playing at very low level in the background:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ot7r8sjhkvo9fef/low%20level%20traffic.mp3?dl=0>

2. This one is of a single gun shot fired randomly. There may be seconds or minutes between them.

Start, again at low level. As soon as you hear one, start engaging your dog with happy talk, games, simple training exercises and food.

For this recording each engagement will be brief as you want everything to calm down again after the sound.

So, mark the sound with an excited "yes" and get the food to him as soon afterwards as possible. :

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/kxo9912ajy0nek1/single%20shot.mp3?dl=0>

3. This one is of fireworks in short bursts. You will have longer with this to engage your dog.

When the sound begins, start to play and feed. Stop when the sound stops each time.

Remember with each recording, to begin with it low and build up over sessions of training. :

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/476zyrpw3e3bful/fireworks%20short%20bursts.mp3?dl=0>

4. Number four is a more prolonged fireworks sequence:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/7kiisvha3uovrvv/fireworks%20prolonged_mixdown.mp3?dl=0

5. Finally here's a compilation of all manner of noises from traffic (sirens and roadworks included) to gun shots and fireworks.

Go carefully with this one. There are sudden noises in it that may be at higher level than other sounds:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/oyvhiio2spjzsyq/compilation%20noise%20with%20surprises.mp3?dl=0>